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A Master's Course in Sustainable Development Advocacy: integrating the Brundtland, Stern and Leitch agendas

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The MA Professional Practice (Sustainable Development Advocacy) was delivered in partnership by the University of Worcester and the Bulmer Foundation between 2003 and 2009. The programme integrated work-based learning with education for sustainable development. Its student projects have catalysed real change within many local businesses and communities. The network of graduates is working to create new paths towards sustainability within organisations and communities, locally and globally. In this way the programme exemplified the Brundtland principles of sustainable development (WCED, 1987); the call by Lord Stern for urgent action to re-orientate the economy towards greater environmental sustainability (Stern, 2007); and the recommendation of the Leitch Review (Leitch, 2006) that skills development should be led by the needs of employers.

The Programme combined three characteristics:

1. An active and experiential pedagogy which integrated work-based skill development at postgraduate level with education for sustainable development.
2. Active engagement with community and business practice in Herefordshire and the West Midlands, with the aim of catalysing change towards greater sustainability.
3. An innovative partnership arrangement between the University of Worcester and the Bulmer Foundation, a Herefordshire-based charity.

Originally launched in 2003, the programme was re-validated for 2007-08 and by 2008-9 had 44 alumni and twelve current students. Capacity problems at the Bulmer Foundation meant that it was not possible to run the programme in 2009-10, although prospective recruitment was to target 13 FTE.

The Bulmer Foundation's mission is to enable and demonstrate sustainable development in

Herefordshire. The programme aimed to exemplify and operationalise this mission. A unique feature of the programme was its groundedness in Herefordshire, which is a very rural county with very little higher education provision. The programme aimed not only to develop its students as sustainable development advocates and practitioners, but also, through the projects and work placements they undertook as part of the programme, to produce real and lasting change towards greater sustainability, particularly within Herefordshire. The applied projects and placements have assisted scores of organisations to confront sustainability challenges and move towards more sustainable practices. The practical and experiential learning meant students were constantly challenged to apply their learning in new and relevant contexts. The focus on developing advocacy skills meant that this growing understanding could be transferred to others in partner organisations, as the following quotes demonstrate:

Herefordshire Council has been a supporter of the MA Sustainable Development Advocacy since its inception, and in 2007 seconded five of our staff to undertake the MA part-time. We see the course as an important support to, and facilitator of, the County sustainable development strategy and of the Council's

internal sustainability policies. The partnership approach, by which the curriculum is delivered through ground-breaking placements in local public, private and third sector organisations, is innovative and unique. These placements have produced many tangible benefits for host organisations (including Herefordshire Council), for the economy of the County, for local communities, and for the environment.

(Michael Hainge, Director of Environment & Planning, Herefordshire Council)

The Fold is a social enterprise making a stand for sustainability. We recognise the positive impacts that MA SDA students and graduates from the course are making by actively creating conversations in areas where people need to develop language and confidence. In my view, the Bulmer Foundation MA in SDA is a terrific, welcome and essential piece of pioneering education. It provides a platform for discussion, debate and dialogue in the under resourced area of applied sustainability.

(Will Tooby, Director, The Fold, Bransford, Worcestershire)

Beyond the curriculum, students became generally engaged in the community during their time on the programme, attending and helping to run sustainability events and developing networks

with opinion leaders in order to position their work the greatest effect.

The programme demonstrated a very good record of graduate employability in sustainability-related careers, for example: Campaigner, Soil Association; Capacity Builder, Environmental Protection UK; Care Farm Co-ordinator; Climate Change Officer; Overseas Environmental Trade Officer, FCO; Researcher, Unilever; Sector Account Manager, Carbon Trust; Sustainability Officer.

One graduate said:

Experience gained on the placements empowered me as I was able to undertake tasks that were of real value to both the organisation and in achieving common (personal and 'global') goals. The diversity of placements enabled me to gain cross-sector experience to really understand how 'the world works' - something that is distinctly lacking from most other academic courses and unique to the practical nature of the course.

(MA SDA Graduate, 2005)

There is an engaged community of alumni, some of whom taught and offered placements on the programme. The first alumni conference was held in May 2009 and was attended by nearly 40 current and past students. The weekend generated ideas to

further enhance the networking between the programme and its alumni.

The programme was significant because it represented a highly innovative and potentially replicable approach to sustainability education at postgraduate level. In particular the pedagogy employed sets the Programme apart. Although active and experiential learning is gaining ground in higher education over more traditional approaches, the integration of personal development skills into the curriculum to the extent seen on the MA SDA Programme is unusual. The programme actively addressed the alignment of sustainable development principles with both personal and professional behaviour. An advocate who tries to persuade others to change but has not, in their own lives, made a commitment to starting the sustainability journey will be ultimately unconvincing. Staff on the Programme believed that the success of the MA SDA in producing on-the-ground change in Herefordshire was in large part due to the confidence and conviction of the students. This in turn was fostered by advocacy skills training, collaborative learning, and the use of national and international experts, as well as alumni, in order to provide role models and to put students in touch with leading edge thinking in the arena of sustainable development.

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Biography

Jane Roberts was the MASDA Programme Leader between 2007 and 2009. The course was originally developed by Professor Shirley Ali Khan, who was Education Director of the Bulmer Foundation until 2009.